

Media Freedom Week Event

Keynote Address by U.S. Deputy Chief of Mission Bryan Hunt

Friday, May 3, 2013

Thank you, Steven (master of ceremony). Members of the diplomatic corps, and distinguished guests.

It's wonderful to be here among media professionals, journalism students, government and civil society leaders celebrating World Press Freedom Day. Like I'm sure many of you do, I believe that every day should be Press Freedom Day.

Some may wonder why media freedom is so important. From my American perspective, the United States was built on freedom of expression. It was one of our first breaths of life as a nation – and remains an indispensable and enduring element of who we are.

It is also a fundamental freedom for all people, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Media freedom is a key part of that; whether it comes from what we say in public squares or on the radio; from what we type on our keyboards online –blogs, tweets and even texts—to what we read in printed newspapers.

Media freedom is the moral equivalent of oxygen. It is how any free, healthy, vibrant, and functioning society breathes, and it is essential to building civil societies. Without it, aspirations choke, economies suffocate, and countries are unable to grow.

Yet many governments do not protect media freedom. Many governments exploit or create criminal libel or defamation or blasphemy laws in their favor. They pressure media outlets to shut down by causing crippling financial damage. They buy or nationalize media outlets to suppress different viewpoints. They filter or shut down access to the Internet. They detain and harass – and worse.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, nearly 600 journalists have been murdered with impunity since 1992 – and last year, 2012, was the deadliest of all for journalists since they began keeping these records. As we meet, almost 250 journalists currently languish in prisons worldwide. They are incarcerated simply for doing their work – reporting to all of us what is going on in their communities and in their countries.

In the weeks leading up to this year's Press Freedom Day, the Department of State has been highlighting emblematic threats to journalists while continuing to call on all governments to protect the universal human right to freedom of expression.

In Papua New Guinea, we are happy to see that media pluralism and independence is amongst the highest in the South Pacific. It's important to have a diverse and independent press, so the people can trust what they read, hear, and see in the media. When we have a free, fair, and vigorous media environment in a democratic society, we are informed about the truth. And that allows us to make the best decisions we can, based on the most reliable information we can find.

But we also see that the legislative protection afforded to Papua New Guinean journalists is not always implemented. As we note on the most recent Human Rights Report released two weeks ago, Editors have complained of intimidation tactics aimed at influencing coverage. We have seen stories recalled in response to legal action threats, this is worrisome.

We need all sides of the equation to be mutually reinforcing: On one side, there are the fundamental freedoms of expression, assembly, and association, and on the other, we need to have freedom of the media so they can hold accountable anyone or any institution that abuses those freedoms. That balance is crucial to a robust democracy.

And that's where education plays a crucial role. We need whole generations of well-trained journalists who can report information reliably, accurately, and with a sense of fairness and balance — who are not satisfied with false innuendo; who

practice analytical reporting that examines the finer details and nuances of the truth; who can learn to adopt – and accept nothing less than – high professional and ethical standards.

As we continue to advocate for freedom of expression and citizen access to more independent, balanced, and reliable sources of information, we also recognize that Papua New Guinea does not face media challenges alone.

In the United States, print media struggles to maintain profitability and journalistic independence. As newsrooms shrink, many critics talk about the drop in quality of reporting. And major news outlets accuse one another of political biases, a lack of journalistic integrity, and poor quality of reporting.

However, America's media truly serves its role as the watchdog on the government to ensure that the people's fundamental freedoms are being protected. And we recognize the contributions that journalists make to the struggle for human dignity, liberty, and prosperity. And through our public diplomacy, we echo those values in our promotion of media freedom and journalistic professionalism throughout the world.

We do that through an array of programs through our Public Affairs Office. We offer the coveted Edward R. Murrow leadership program and Foreign Press Centers that provide direct access to authoritative American information sources.

We also invite Papua New Guinean journalists to the United States to cover major events like our November presidential elections.

On our Facebook page, we encourage open dialogue and freedom of expression.

Our most recent Earth Day Photo contest, for example, promoted citizen journalism as people around the country submitted photos and expressed their environmental concerns.

When U.S. officials meet with governments around the world, we remind them that allowing free expression increases – rather than diminishes – their chances of long term stability and prosperity. We look forward to continuing our work with the Government of Papua New Guinea, civil society, and media organizations to promote the idea that even the smallest voice from the tiniest village must be heard.

But those who can make those voices heard are people like you – not only working as journalists with high standards, but acting as citizens who demand and support a free and vigorous media that doesn't let emotions get in the way of truth. On those foundations, democracies are built.

Thank you.